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*Islands on
the Western
Horizon*

A photograph of a lighthouse on a grassy hill. The lighthouse is white with a dark top section. It is situated on a hill with a dirt path leading up to it. The foreground is filled with yellow flowers and green shrubs. The sky is blue and clear.

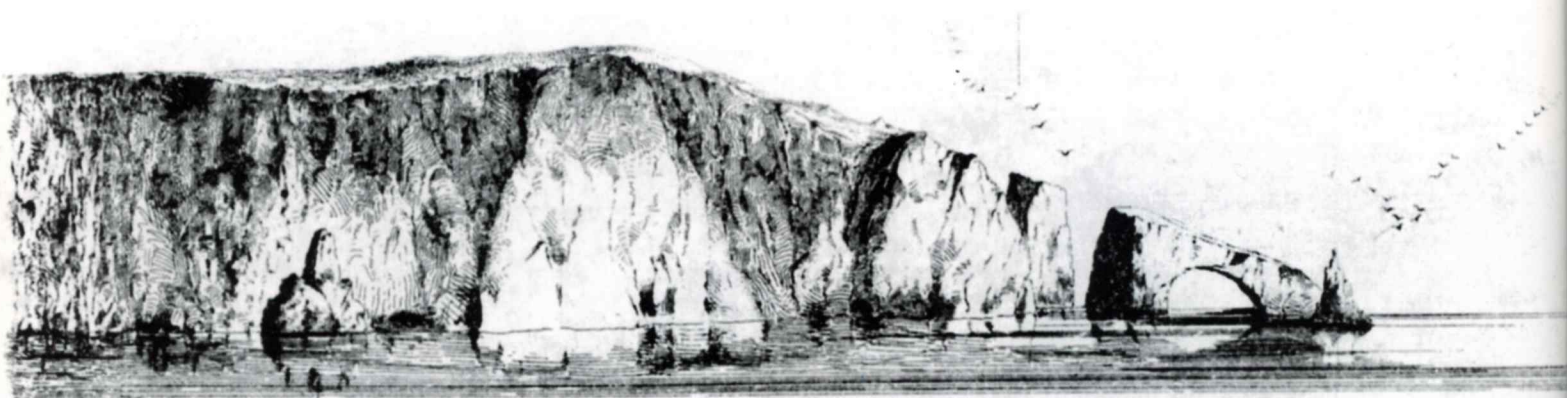
"A thousand hiding places"

The Smuggling of Chinese Immigrants and Opium In the Channel Islands

Linda Bentz

"If smugglers . . . do not there ply their trade, they miss the best vantage-ground on the Pacific, as lonely coasts abound in deep caves and convenient landing-places for small boats."

Martinette Kinsell, "The Santa Barbara Islands," in *The Overland Monthly*, 1891



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The Channel Islands, peaks of mountains floating cloudlike on the horizon off Southern California's coast, are a beautiful sight for sunset gazers or surfers along the mainland beaches. What most do not realize is that during the 1800s and early 1900s, smugglers, their human contraband, and customs officials played a dangerous game of cat and mouse throughout that picturesque scenery. The islands' remote location and abundance of caves and canyons provided excellent hiding places from the few vessels that patrolled the area. Smuggling was so prevalent that two islands, San Clemente and Santa Cruz, have locations named "Smugglers Cove."

This maritime contraband trade began in the early 1800s with the smuggling of sea otter pelts, which was against Spanish law, as well as the concealment of goods to avoid customs fees. Later in the century came the transport of opium and Chinese immigrants, and later still, during Prohibition, the islands offered an excellent location to stockpile alcohol.¹

The Channel Islands reached their peak of notoriety during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Federal laws excluding the immigration of Chinese laborers, and the high tariff on opium (and its eventual ban) created an environment where the smuggling of both people and drugs could flourish. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Channel Islands were suspected of providing temporary hiding places for Chinese immigrants and opium, public pressure to stop smuggling was often pronounced, and while government agents along the Channel struggled to stop illicit trade, they were frequently frustrated. This article will focus on the smuggling of Chinese immigrants and opium on the five northern Channel Islands, and government efforts to stop the trade.²

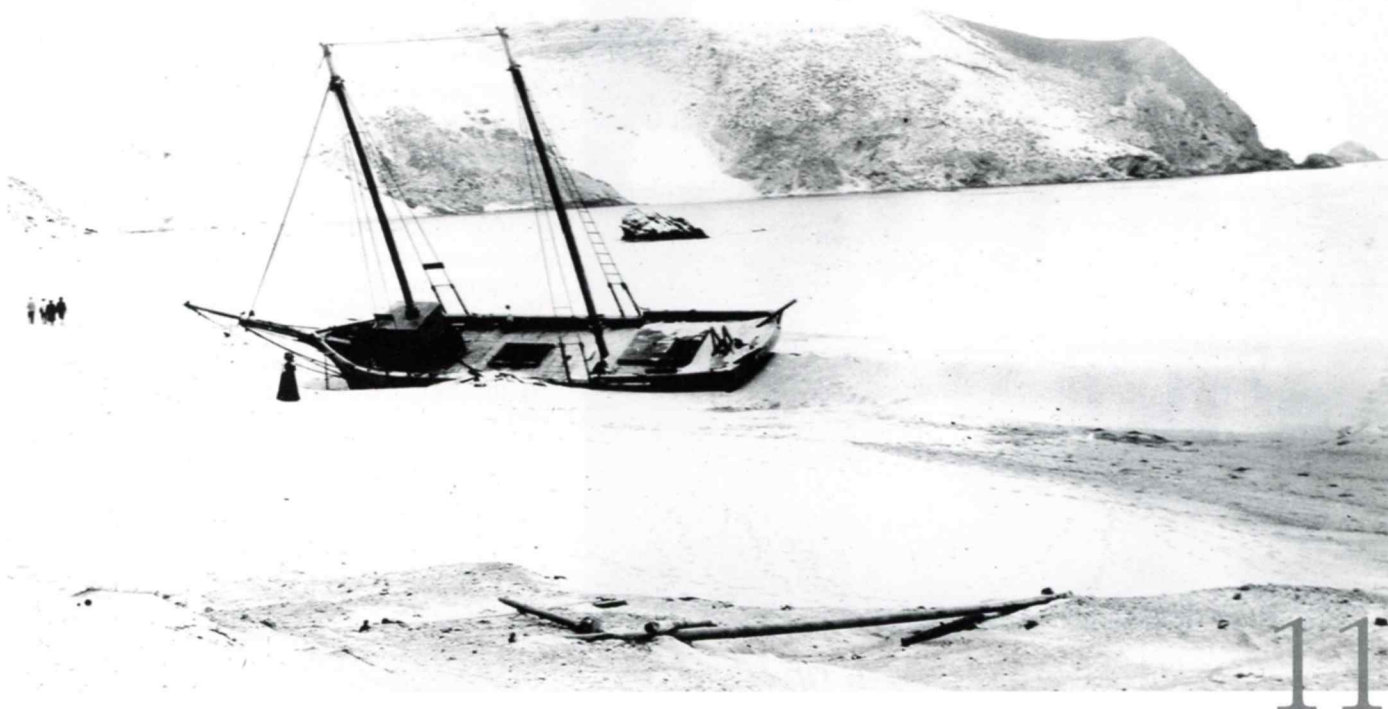
The "Trade" in Chinese Immigrants

Today, most immigrants entering the American Southwest illegally are Mexicans seeking better lives in the north, but between the 1880s and the 1940s illegal immigrants entering the Southwest were primarily Chinese men. Taking advantage of undermanned borders, Chinese immigrants entered the United States from Canada and from Mexico, leaving behind poor farming conditions, overcrowding, and civil unrest in China. While the Chinese had come to the goldfields of California in the mid-1800s along with miners from all over the world, anti-Chinese hostility took hold by the 1870s as readily accessible ores were depleted, unemployment was high, and the growing union movement competed for jobs. Congress passed a bill in 1882



Readers of *Overland Monthly* magazine encountered these disconsolate-looking captured Chinese in 1913, and read that "the promised wage of a dollar or a dollar and one-half a day is the will-o'-the-wisp that lures them." Some paid \$650 for the trip, an increase of \$400 over 1911's going rate, apparently because of stepped-up enforcement. Henry Weddle, a Customs Inspector in 1900, recalled that "if a storm came up they would put the Chinese down in the hold where they carried fish, and batten the hold down, and the poor devils would have to live down there if they could. We heard they threw some overboard to get rid of them." The *Kate and Anna*, below, ran aground on San Miguel in 1902 after a profitable career smuggling Chinese immigrants and opium.

Above, Overland Monthly 61, 1913; below, courtesy National Park Service; facing page, courtesy Ventura County Museum of History & Art



forbidding immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years, and the 1892 Geary Act prolonged their exclusion for another decade. Further legislation denied Chinese laborers entrance into the United States until these laws were rescinded in 1943.³

Exclusionary legislation created the conditions for the overland and maritime smuggling of Chinese men to flourish. While overland smuggling seems to have predominated, many came by sea.⁴ Smugglers used the islands as a kind of way station, a place where the Chinese could be left in limbo while waiting for boats to take them to the mainland.

From the passage of the first Exclusion Act of 1882 until 1926, the U.S. Customs Service was mandated to stop illegal Chinese immigrants who were smuggled overland across the highly porous Mexican border or carried by small boats to West Coast beaches and ports. Despite its weakness in manpower, the Customs Service had considerable success, reportedly intercepting and deporting half of the estimated 6,000 Chinese who attempted to enter the U.S. illegally between 1882 and 1910.⁵

The Wilmington Customs District, organized on June 16, 1882, had jurisdiction over the Channel Islands as well as Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Bernardino counties. In 1890, San Diego's Customs Collector, John R. Berry, informed his colleague in Wilmington that "I have learned that the expectation that Chinamen will attempt to get into the United States on the coast at or near Santa Barbara is based upon information derived from a Chinaman at Santa Monica and one at Los Angeles. I would suggest, therefore, that you investigate thoroughly for yourself."⁶ Collector Berry's suspicions proved well founded. In his 1910 book *The Channel Islands of California*, Charles Holder recalled a winter visit to San Clemente Island twenty years previously, where he encountered "a clever old Chinese genius" who appeared to be merely an abalone fisherman on the island, which was seldom visited in winter.

Some one who owned a little schooner brought Chinamen up the coast from Mexico and landed them at San Clemente—an easy thing to do when the Government had only one revenue cutter on the coast, and that up north all the time. As soon as the men were landed they began to collect abalones, and the day I stumbled on their camp they had hundreds piled up in heaps - shells and meat. Upon seeing me a number of men ran for a big tent. I ran after them, and when I reached the tent I threw open the fly. They were a demoralized lot of smugglers. I laughed, and that raised their spirits; they had taken me for a revenue officer.⁷



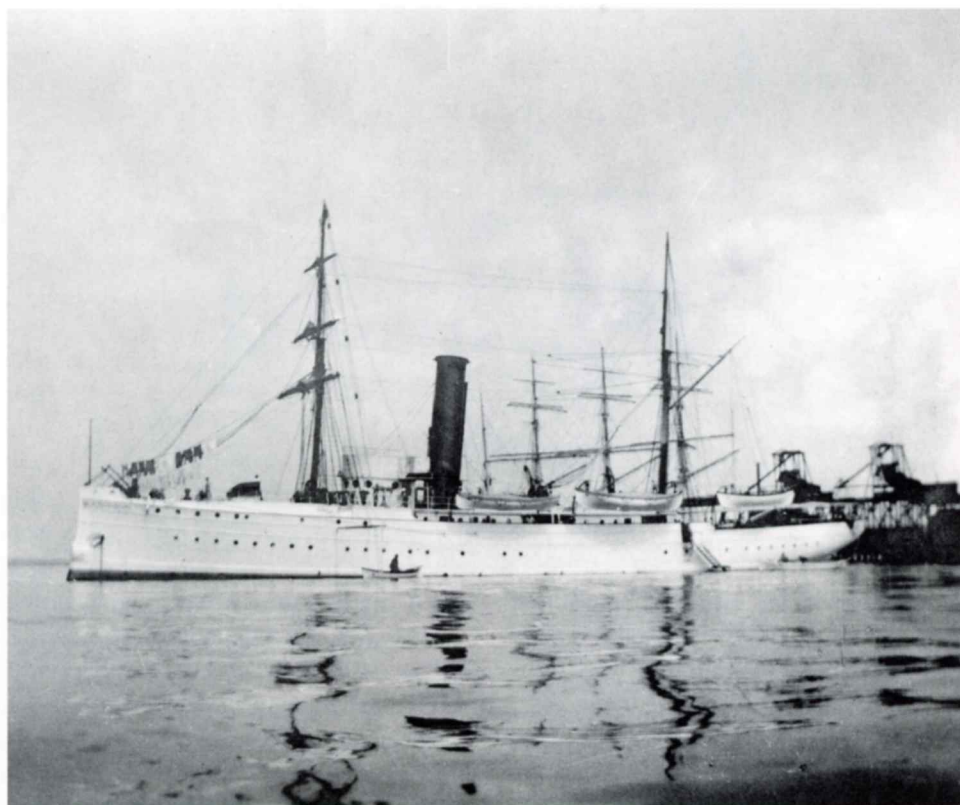
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Great Cave of San Clemente Island

As government efforts intensified, revenue cutters were sent in hopes of curtailing the illegal immigration, as the *Ventura Free Press* reported in 1904:

During the past week government officers have been in Ventura secretly at work in an attempt to capture parties who are suspected of smuggling Chinese into the country. Reports are persistent that Chinese are being landed on the Channel Islands, and then landed from small boats on the mainland between Ventura and Santa Barbara. The reports were the cause of the cruise of the Revenue Cutter *Manning* in the Channel Islands recently.⁸

Ten years later, the same newspaper reported that the *Manning* was to be transferred from San Francisco to San Pedro to scout for smugglers. The *Manning* was the swiftest cutter in the service and carried fifteen men and powerful searchlights. "The determination to transfer the cutter is the result of the failure of the present cutter service to run down the smugglers who are known to be operating extensively between Mexico and the islands off Santa Barbara."⁹ Customs authorities spent considerable time and energy trying to capture illegal Chinese immigrants and the captains of the small vessels that smuggled them, but lacked the manpower and resources to adequately fulfill their responsibility.



Opium Smuggling

Historically, opium and its derivatives have been used in the United States primarily for medicinal purposes. Heroin, for example, was once believed to cure respiratory afflictions.¹⁰ Once Chinese arrived in the country, they desired products from their homeland, including opium. Chinese merchants sold the drug, and smoking establishments known as "opium dens" existed in most Chinese communities. Euroamericans began to protest the use of opium by Chinese immigrants during the anti-Chinese movement in the 1870s, voicing fears that opium addiction would spread from the Chinese to their own communities.¹¹

The federal government placed a heavy tax on imported opium and domestically produced supplies made from raw opium imports. Beginning in 1870, opium was taxed at \$6.00 per pound, which doubled by 1897. Chinese *tongs*, fraternal organizations found in most Chinese communities, controlled the majority of opium smuggling.¹²

The Channel Islands provided the perfect setting for drug smuggling. To avoid paying the heavy tariff, smugglers hid opium on the islands and transported it to the mainland in small boats, including junks built by Chinese fishermen in San Diego and elsewhere along the West Coast. The

The cutter *Manning* in San Diego Bay.

San Diego Historical Society Photograph Coll.; at left, from Charles Holder's 1910 The Channel Islands of California

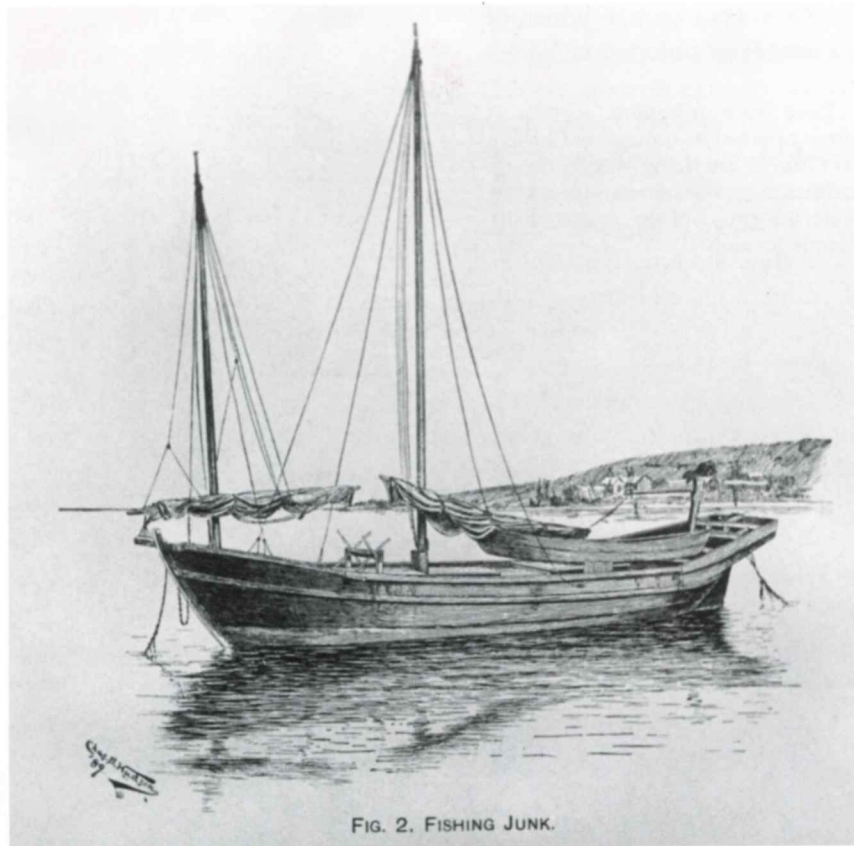


FIG. 2. FISHING JUNK.

Junks built by California's Chinese fishermen were fast and popular with smugglers. This 54-foot craft, "one of the largest that sails from San Diego," was drawn by Charles Bradford Hudson in 1889 to illustrate "The Fishing Vessels and Boats of the Pacific Coast" in the 1890 Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission.

MMSD Coll. P2836; facing page courtesy of Ventura County Museum of History & Art

Ventura Free Press informed readers in 1890 that one such junk was running drugs into coves on Santa Cruz Island, which were then transported to Santa Barbara:

Several junks are continually in and out of this port, and if the county had an inspector here some startling developments might be made. But as the nearest inspector is 30 miles away, Santa Barbara is the safest smuggling point on the coast and that fact is well known to those in the business.¹³

Vessels also met in the sparsely-patrolled Santa Barbara Channel for illicit exchanges. "There are several smart schooner-rigged vessels employed in the business," Venturans read in 1891, "and they stand off and on in the track of ocean going vessels, principally of the China line steamers, and away out at sea one of these vessels will take off what drug is on board the ship and beat off down the coast to watch [for] an opportunity to land her stuff."¹⁴

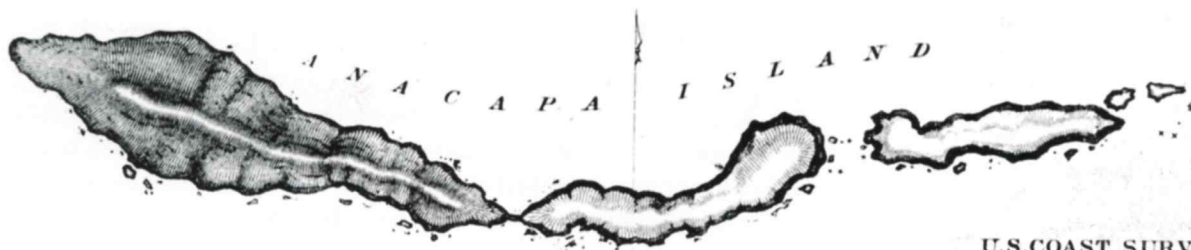
It was the duty of the Customs officials to collect taxes on opium, and to investigate and stop opium smuggling. The U.S. Opium Commissioner, the "drug czar" of his day, estimated that the Customs Service collected taxes on only sixty percent of the smoking opium imported between 1890 and 1899.¹⁵ In September 1891, the *Oakland Times* ran an article entitled "Opium Smuggling: Santa Barbara Channel Furnishes Many Opportunities," that severely tarnished the reputation of Customs officials in Santa Barbara and Ventura.

A "gang of opium smugglers," the reporter asserted, "has found a new field of operations along the shores of the Santa Barbara Channel." He pointed his finger at the government:

the revenue officials are proverbially—sometimes interestedly—slow, and smuggling may be going on in a given locality for years before any knowledge of the fact comes to the authorities. The channel route, away from the hurry and bustle of the large ports north and south, is as quiet as could be desired for the business . . .

The "deserted rocks" of the Channel Islands, most of them visited only seasonally by Chinese fishermen, were "honey-combed with wave-worn caves" which, the reporter continued,

afford a thousand hiding places for the drug. There are secure anchorages that revenue vessels never think to visit, and here could lie all unperceived the swift little schooners that ply in or out to sea to meet the China steamers in the night and take off the stuff upon which it is not desired to pay duty. Running back to the island anchorages, nothing is easier than to beat across the channel and land the opium either at Ventura or Santa Barbara or at some point between those towns.



Note
Anacapa Island is due East of Santa Cruz Island in
approx/Lat. 34° 00' and Long. 119° 23' W. from Greenwich
Observatory.
Variation of the Magnetic Needle 13° 31' E.

U.S. COAST SURVEY
A. D. BACHE Supdt.
Sketch of
ANACAPA ISLAND
IN
SANTA BARBARA CHANNEL
By Lieut. T. H. STEVENS U.S.N. Assist. U.S.C.S.

1854

Nobody is on watch there—for, although there is an agent of the collector of the port of Wilmington resident at Ventura, his duties require him to cover also the towns of Hueneme and Santa Barbara, and he is a sleepy old fossil anyway, whose ideas run vastly more upon what he is to have for the next day's dinner than upon the preservation of Uncle Sam's interests. So long as he draws his salary, he thinks that he has discharged his every obligation to the government. Once landed, of course, the drug passes into the hands of the Chinese, who are numerous thereabouts, and the little brown men proceed to realize upon it in their cunning fashion.¹⁶

The representatives of the Customs Service suddenly found themselves on the defensive. In a letter to Wilmington written days after the article appeared, Ventura's aggrieved Customs Inspector admitted that the presence of so much isolated coastline rendered the opportunities for smugglers "more or less favorable," but Stephen Bowers assured his superior that

I am doing everything in my powers to watch for it. I have a trustworthy man at Hueneme, and at Carpenteria and one at Santa Barbara wharf. I have promised to reward for any service rendered me in the matter. They are the wharfingers of these respective ports, and will telegraph me should their suspicions be aroused. I make frequent visits to Santa Barbara and am continually on the alert.¹⁷

There may perhaps have been reason for the reporter to suspect the ability of some of those responsible for law enforcement. An official in Santa Barbara reported that after the wreck of the ship *Goldenhorn* on Santa Rosa Island in 1892, A. E. Thorsson, a member of the crew, claimed to have witnessed the smuggling of opium on a large scale in the Channel. Thorsson offered to help customs officials—for a fee—and while an agent was dispatched to Santa Barbara to make inquiries, no evidence of further efforts appears in the official correspondence.¹⁸

Customs officials aboard revenue cutters struggled to stop smuggling but were often frustrated, as were the officers on the cutter *Hugh McCulloch*. According to a Santa Barbara newspaper in 1909, "It is claimed that the gang secured opium from coasters and then cached it on Santa Cruz Island, later taking it in small lots by launches to a point north of Santa Monica. The officials searched the island vicinity at night, but gave up, unsuccessful, yesterday."¹⁹ In the scores of newspapers and Customs records related to the Northern Channel Islands reviewed by the author, no arrests were ever reported for the smuggling of opium.

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After the passage of the Opium Smoking Exclusion Act in 1909, opium use declined. Derivatives such as morphine and heroin were available and less costly. Moreover, opium use was associated with the Chinese population, and due to exclusion laws, aging, and violence, the market for opium dwindled along with the numbers of Chinese men.²⁰

Though Prohibition temporarily brought a boom in smuggling, during the twentieth century the Channel Islands and the waters around them swiftly lost much of their isolation, and with it their advantages for smugglers. Today, few visitors to the five northernmost islands, now Channel Islands National Park, realize that this picturesque scenery was once the setting for intrigue and deception.

NOTES

The 1902 wreck of the *Kate and Anna* on San Miguel offers tourists a chance to skylark, but her immigrant smuggling career was serious business. Profits estimated in 1913 as between \$5000 and \$20,000 for every trip from Ensenada made such risks worth taking.

Courtesy National Park Service

- 1 Adele Ogden, *The California Sea Otter Trade 1784-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941), 131; Ross Gast, *Contentious Consul: A Biography of John Coffin Jones, First United States Consular Agent at Hawaii* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1976), 127-131.
- 2 The five northern Channel Islands are Anacapa, Santa Cruz, San Miguel, Santa Barbara, and Santa Rosa.
- 3 On anti-Chinese discrimination, see especially Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Elmer C. Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).
- 4 National Archives Branch Depository, Laguna Niguel, California. Finding Aide, RG 36.
- 5 National Archives Branch Depository, Laguna Niguel, California. Finding Aide, Record Group 36 (hereinafter RG 36), 189. The frustrations of Customs officials in pursuing maritime smugglers are reflected in, for example, Santa Barbara Customs Inspector William Cummings to his Los Angeles superior H. Z. Osborne, 17 October 1892, National Archives, Incoming Correspondence, RG 36, in book for March 1892-March 1893, Box 7. See also Carl E. Prince and Mollie Keller, "Customs and Immigration: Enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882-1926," *The United States Customs Service: A Bicentennial History* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1989), 172-174.
- 6 John R. Berry to Collector of Customs, Wilmington, 16 December 1890, National Archives, Incoming Correspondence, RG 36, in book for March 1889-December 1890, Box 5.
- 7 Charles Frederick Holder, *The Channel Islands of California* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1910), 356-357.
- 8 *Ventura Free Press*, 29 July 1904.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 30 January 1914.
- 10 Opium was first imported into the U.S. from Turkey and Persia early in the 19th century, and tariffs were established to record and regulate it by 1832. Morphine, an opium derivative, was used for pain relief during the Civil War. Gregory Yee Mark, "Opium in America and the Chinese," in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1997), 61-62, 67.
- 11 See, for example, "The Opium Fiends," an item from the *San Bernardino Times* quoted in the *Weekly Independent* (Santa Barbara), 20 February 1886. Opium smoking was banned in San Francisco in 1875 and in Virginia City the following year. Jerry Wylie and Richard E. Fike, "Chinese Opium Smoking Techniques and Paraphernalia," in *Hidden Heritage: Historical Archaeology of the Overseas Chinese* (Amityville: Baywood Publishing, 1993), 258.
- 12 Martin Booth, *Opium: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 196; David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 17.
- 13 "Smuggling at Santa Barbara," *Ventura Free Press*, 26 July 1890.

- 14 "Is Opium Smuggled?," *Ventura Weekly Free Press*, 14 August 1891.
- 15 Courtwright, *Dark Paradise*, 18.
- 16 *Oakland Times*, reprinted in *Los Angeles Times*, 14 September 1891, and *Ventura Star Free Press*, 18 September 1891. In a letter written shortly after the article appeared, Stephen Bowers confided to his superior H. Z. Osborne that the article's author, a former *Los Angeles Tribune* reporter now in Oakland, was the son of an unsuccessful applicant for the inspectorship. Bowers (Ventura) to Osborne (Wilmington), 17 September 1891, National Archives, Incoming Correspondence, RG 36, in book for January 1891-February 1892, Box 6.
- 17 Bowers to Osborne, 17 September 1891.
- 18 U.S. Commissioner W. S. Day (Santa Barbara) to U.S. Collector (San Francisco), 5 May and 10 May, 1896, National Archives, Incoming Correspondence, RG 36, in book for March-December 1896, Box 11.
- 19 *Santa Barbara News Press*, 4 July 1909.
- 20 Courtwright, *Dark Paradise*, 85-86. There are no statistics regarding the prevalence of smuggling on the Islands. The Customs Service put great time and resources into the pursuit of smugglers, yet, in scores of newspapers reviewed by the author, no arrests for smuggling of Chinese or opium were reported on the Northern Channel Islands, though arrests were made in the southern islands. Further research is required; a comparison between smuggling activities on these islands and elsewhere on the West Coast will be valuable.

